NO PLACE FOR "WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN"
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 22:25–31
John 15:1–8
Genesis 1:26–27
Isaiah 49:15
Hosea 11:1–4

"Can a woman forget her nursing child?"
Isaiah 49:15 (NRSV)

The "Image of God" is neither male nor female. . . .
Paul says that in Christ there is neither male nor female.
The positive way of knowing, on the other hand, affirms that
there is, in God both the masculine and the feminine.
There is a mother's heart at the heart of God, as well as a father's.
The prophet Isaiah compares God's love to a mother's when he asks:
"Can a woman forget her nursing child?" . . . In essence,
God is neither male nor female but in his theophanies God is both.
And so it is to both that we may look in our search to know more of the
Unknowable.

J. Philip Newell
The Book of Creation

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf begins a new book on the topic of giving with a dramatic personal story. Volf and his wife had taken their adopted three-month-old son to visit his birth mother and her ten-year-old daughter, the baby's sister.

> "The first thing I saw was a tear—a huge unforgettable tear in the big brown eyes of a ten-year-old girl. Then I saw tears in her mother's eyes. And in all their tears just enough joy was mixed with pain to underscore that pain's severity; their joy at seeing him, their three-month-old brother and son, and their intense pain that it was the first time they'd seen him since he was just two days old, when they'd kissed him good-bye. (*Free of Charge*, p. 11)

Volf admits that even though he was deeply, profoundly grateful for the gift of his son, he still had a lingering negative view of a mother who would give up her baby, for any reason. It just didn't seem right. But during that

meeting his mind changed profoundly. The child's birth mother handed him a letter she had written and asked Professor Volf to read it to the boy later. "I did it for you," she wrote to her child. "Someday you will understand." Volf reflects: "She loved him for his own sake and therefore she would rather have suffered his absence if he flourished than to have enjoyed his presence if he languished. Now it was my turn to cry over the beauty and tragedy of her love."

In that mother's selfless, sacrificial love, Miroslav Volf, academician, professional theologian, saw a metaphor, a picture of the love of God to which Christian faith points and upon which the Christian church is built.

"There is a mother's heart at the heart of God," J. Philip Newell says. Newell is a Church of Scotland theologian.

It is Mother's Day, an occasion the preacher learns to respect. In seminary you are taught that Mother's Day is not really a religious holiday or church festival at all but a product of purely commercial interests—the greeting card people, florists, and restaurant owners—an example of how the culture invades and takes over the church, so the faithful thing to do is simply ignore it. But the preacher learns that it is not a wise thing to do.

I keep in my file on the subject something Robert Fulghum wrote. He was a minister before he became a best-selling author and he remembers:

> For twenty-five years of my life, the second Sunday of May was trouble. . . . I was obliged in some way to address the subject of Mother's Day. It could not be avoided. . . . The congregation was quite open-minded and gave me free reign in the pulpit. But when it came to the second Sunday in May the expectation was summarized in the words of one of the more outspoken women in the church: "I'm bringing my mother to church on Mother's Day, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want. But it had better include MOTHER, and it had better be good!" (*It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It,* p. 100)

It happens to me every year—"I'm bring Mother on Sunday, so make it good!" And every year I do find myself remembering fondly the one who gave me birth and the custom at the time: we wore a flower in our lapel when we went to church on Mother's Day—a red carnation because mother was alive. My father wore a white carnation because his mother had died.

Miroslav Volf and Philip Newell suggest that the topic has important theological potential because motherhood, a mother's heart, that birth mother's selfless love, are, in fact, authentic ways to talk about God and God's love. And it is a way the Bible talks about God.

“Let us make humankind in our image,” God says in the Genesis creation account. “So God created humankind in his image—male and female.” You’ve got to have the feminine, that is to say, if you want to have an authentic biblical image of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Can a woman forget her nursing child? . . . Yet, I will not forget you.”

And my favorite, from the prophet Hosea:

> When Israel was a child, I loved him. . . .
> It was I who taught [them] to walk,
> I took them up in my arms. . . .
> I was to them like those
> who lift infants to their cheeks.
> I bent down to them and fed them.

Those are specifically feminine, maternal images: bending down and feeding is an allusion to nursing used to describe God and God’s relationship to us. This is not just a politically correct effort to be inclusive but one of the most ancient Judeo-Christian concepts of God. The Bible, written thousands of years ago in a strongly patriarchal culture, uses masculine images for God about 75 percent of the time: king, warrior, father. But remarkably, for that age, the Bible also uses feminine images, a nursing mother, a compassionate nurturer, a comforting, sheltering maternal figure—a mother. David H. C. Read preached a famous sermon once, “The Motherhood of God,” in which he said it’s not wrong to call God Father. It’s just not enough, not complete, unless somehow you can also call God Mother.

Language limits, of course. As soon as you use words—nouns, pronouns, adjectives—to describe God, you limit God. It was the genius of Judaism to understand that. In a time when ancient religion knew exactly what the gods acted like and looked like—and so could be represented by idols—Israel’s strongest taboo was against the use of idols of any kind, even the idols of language. And so when it came to the name of God, ancient Israel used a list of consonants, something like JHWH, which we sometimes pronounce Yahweh and from which the word *Jehovah* is derived. But they didn’t say it, because even to say it was to limit the mystery and majesty of God.

It was feminist theology in our day that helpfully recovered the notion and taught us that exclusive masculine language not only limits God but doesn’t do justice to the biblical point that God cannot be limited and that if all we have are masculine words and images, what we have is not God at all but an idol.

But change isn't easy. If you've been calling God nothing but "Father" in your prayers since childhood, it isn't easy to use other terms. Integrity insists, however, that we at least acknowledge the overwhelming and sometimes unnecessary use of masculine language in scripture and the liturgies of the church. The Greek word *anthropos,* for instance, does not have to be translated "man." It can also be "person." And so "Let your light shine among men" could also be translated "among all people." When in my favorite hymn, "Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty," we come to a wonderfully maternal image, we sing "shelters thee under *his* wings," but that's a feminine image. And the Doxology—we could sing:

> Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
> Praise God, all creatures here below;
> Praise God above, ye heavenly host

Instead of "Praise him, Praise him."

We do have a pronoun problem in English. Anne Fadiman, in a wonderful little book about reading and books and language, tells how, as a married woman who kept her family name, Fadiman, she had a problem and became reluctantly convinced that "Ms." was a solution. She wasn't a Miss or a Mrs., but she is enough of a scholar of language to experience the discomfort we all feel occasionally when we try so hard to be inclusive and end up being awkward. She writes, "On the sanguinary fields of gender politics, Ms. has scored a clear victory. I wish I could say the same of the United Church of Christ's new inclusive hymnal in which 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' has been replaced by 'Dear God, Embracing Humankind.' I'm not sure I want to be embraced by an Almighty with so little feeling for poetry" (*Ex Libris*, p. 73).

Israel's genius was in understanding the oneness of God, the gift of monotheism, and the mystery of God that cannot be limited by human idols —either made of wood or words—and, at the same time, the nearness, the closeness, the immediacy, the intimacy, the personhood of God. God is personal. That's the point. The creator God comes close. The mysterious one who rides on the wings of the storm also holds the people in his or her arms. The one who fashions the sun and moon hears the cries of the people and comes with comfort and compassion like a loving father. The one who sets the stars in the heavens comes down to people, to feed and embrace them like a loving mother. It is very much a parental God the Bible presents.

Jesus was revolutionary on the topic. Feminist theologians helped us understand that how we use language to describe God and the role of women in the church and the world are related. In a culture that regarded

women as property, chattel, with no rights at all and no status or role to play outside the home, even in the synagogue, Jesus was a radical. He associated with women, publicly, which no male was supposed to do other than with his wife. He talked with women, bantered with women, ate and drank with women. Mary and Martha were his dear friends. Mary Magdalene was in the company of disciples. It was Mary and the other women who stayed near his cross as he died. It was the women who bravely came to the tomb on Easter morning, and it was to Mary that the risen Christ first appeared. Women played prominent roles in the earliest Christian churches. Paul lists them by name as sponsors, supporters, leaders. In its origins, Christianity was radically egalitarian and radically inclusive. And it is no little irony that when it comes to access to leadership and the exercise of leadership, large segments of the Christian church fall far behind the world—business, the professions, the military. And some, like the Southern Baptists, are going in the opposite direction, prohibiting churches even from ordaining women.

When it comes to gender politics, Jesus was a revolutionary. And when it came to God language, he was stunning. He invoked one of the most intimate words in the language, the language Jesus himself spoke. “Abba,” masculine to be sure, was the intimate word a child would use to address his or her father in the intimacy of the home and family circle. “Daddy” is probably as close as we can come in English. What is so different and so stunning about the word is its intimacy. God is as close and intimate as a mother or a father is to a precious child. Fred Craddock captures the sense of it by describing as the biggest myth in the world something a mother says to her child who has fallen down and bumped or scraped an arm or leg: “Here, let me kiss it and make it well,” she says as she gathers the child in her lap. Is it the kiss that makes it well? No. It’s those moments in a mother’s lap. It’s that close and intimate, Craddock says. Jesus Christ invites us to sit for a while in the lap of God, who knows us, who hurts when we hurt, who experiences our fears, our anxiety, our joys—a God who loves us.

When St. Paul describes what happens in the Divine–human encounter, the new situation in which we find ourselves in Christ, he too uses parental language. In Christ we become the adopted children of God, God’s daughters and sons. It is what we affirm every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism. The waters of Baptism on the brow of an infant remind us of the miracle of God’s love that adopts each one of us. “See what love God has for us that we are called children of God, and so we are.” When you’re in trouble, Martin Luther said, “remember your Baptism.”

What do you and I need most in the world? After our physical needs for food, water, shelter, what is it we most long for? When we’re in trouble, when out of the blue disaster strikes, a loved one is taken from us, the test

comes back positive, a relationship ends, the bottom falls out, or merely at the end of the day, late at night, when you find yourself asking "What's it all about?"—what is it you and I most need to hear and to know? There are many ways to answer that question, of course, but most of them come down to something like we most need to know that we are intended, that we are cared about, that we matter to someone, that we are wanted, that we are loved.

And that, in its simplest, straightest form is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about. You and I are intended, cared about, wanted, and loved by the One who created us. We matter to the One who is like a mother cradling her nursing child, like a waiting father running down the road to welcome a child home. You and I are loved by God.

"No Place for 'Whereabouts Unknown.'" I discovered that line in a poem by Etheridge Knight. It's in *Twenty Poems to Nurture Your Soul*, a collection of poems put together by Judith Valente and Charles Reynard, two fascinating people. She is a PBS-TV correspondent here in Chicago and appears regularly on *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. He is a circuit court judge in central Illinois. They are devout Roman Catholics, and they share a love for poetry. Together they conduct a monthly poetry workshop at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center. The title of this sermon is from a poem written by a young man in prison in Indiana for drugs and larceny, Etheridge Knight. Knight's family is so important to him that, before he was incarcerated, he hitchhiked every year from Los Angles to attend the annual family reunion in Mississippi—"to sip corn whiskey from jars with the men and flirt with the women." He's in jail now and can't be there for the reunion this year, so instead he taped to the wall of his cell 47 pictures and writes, "47 black faces, my father, mother, grandmothers, grandfathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins.

> They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk,
> I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I am all of them,
> They are all of me.
> They are farmers, I am a thief.

Knight reflects on the name he shares with them, his family, and remembers an uncle who disappeared when he was 15—

> . . . just took off and caught a freight (they say)
> He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion,
> he causes uneasiness in the class, he is an empty space.
> My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible
> with everybody's birth date (and death date) in it, always mentions
> him.
> *There is no place in her Bible for "Whereabouts Unknown."*

The love of that family, that grandmother who simply has no place in her Bible for “whereabouts unknown” is the power to heal and redeem and save that young man’s soul and his life.

And so it is; you and I are loved with a Mother’s and a Father’s love that will never let us go.

Thanks be to God.